

Understanding Prognosis and Cancer Statistics

It is natural for anyone facing cancer to be concerned about what the future holds. Understanding the nature of cancer and what to expect can help patients and their loved ones plan treatment, anticipate lifestyle changes, and make quality of life and financial decisions. Cancer patients frequently ask their doctor or search on their own for statistics to answer the question, “What is my prognosis?”

Prognosis is a prediction of the future course and outcome of a disease and an indication of the likelihood of recovery from that disease. However, it is only a prediction. When doctors discuss a patient’s prognosis, they are attempting to project what is likely to occur for that individual patient. The doctor may speak of a *favorable* prognosis, if the cancer is expected to respond well to treatment, or an *unfavorable* prognosis, if the cancer is likely to be difficult to control.

A cancer patient’s prognosis can be affected by many factors, particularly the type of cancer the patient has, the stage of the cancer (the extent to which the cancer has metastasized, or spread), or its grade (how aggressive the cancer is or how closely the cancer resembles normal tissue). Other factors that may also affect a person’s prognosis include the patient’s age and general health or the effectiveness of treatment.

Statistics are also used by the doctor to help estimate prognosis. *Survival* statistics indicate how many people with a certain type and stage of cancer survive the disease. The 5-year survival rates are the most common measure used. They measure the effect of the cancer over a 5 year period of time. Survival rates include persons who survive 5 years after diagnosis, whether in remission, disease-free, or under treatment. It is important to understand that statistics alone cannot be used to predict what will happen to a particular patient because no two patients are exactly alike.

Patients and their loved ones face many uncertainties when dealing with cancer. For some, coping is easier if they know the statistics; for others, statistical information is confusing, fearful, and too impersonal to be of use. The doctor who is most familiar with the patient's situation is in the best position to discuss a patient's prognosis and to help interpret what the statistics may mean for them.

If patients or their loved ones feel they want to know prognostic information, they should talk with the doctor. At the same time, it is important for patients to understand that even the doctor cannot tell them exactly what to expect; in fact, a patient's prognosis may change over time if the cancer progresses, or if treatment is successful.

Seeking prognosis information and understanding statistics can help some patients reduce their fears as they learn more about what their prognosis means for them. It is a personal decision and the patient's choice about how much information to accept and how to deal with it.

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Sources of National Cancer Institute Information

Cancer Information Service

Toll-free: 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237)

TTY (for deaf and hard of hearing callers): 1-800-332-8615

NCI Online***Internet***

Use <http://www.cancer.gov> to reach NCI's Web site.

CancerMail Service

To obtain a contents list, send e-mail to cancermail@icicc.nci.nih.gov with the word "help" in the body of the message.

CancerFax® fax on demand service

Dial 301-402-5874 and listen to recorded instructions.

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